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The Stone House in Herăști Architectural Study¹

Eugenia Greceanu

The country road crossing Herăști village and heading for Hotarele village passes by the church erected by Lady Elina Basarab. A path lined up by a hedge branches off from the wall surrounding the church courtyard, taking the visitor to the front gate of the stone house premises. Through the brick gate arch that connects the annexes, one can get a glimpse of the chaotic shape of the derelict stone house ruins. The closer one draws, the bigger his surprise is when he observes the stone frontage, on which time has left its wonderful golden mark. Heading north and passing by the windows with a clearly outlined ledge and by the low cellar arcade, one can get a full view of the beautiful Argeș meadow, highlighted by the prevailing location of the house. Towards east, the only wall that has endured almost entirely displays the sober elegance of its stony face. The colossal inferior level, pierced only by the narrow, hollow cellars, is in sharp contrast with the large, well-balanced windows on the first floor, highlighted by a double layer of the block framing in the background. A cornice with slightly marked patterns carved in massive stone blocks graciously rounds off the architecture of this ensemble.

Whereas the ruins of the stone house preserve enough elements enabling us to recall the image of the place in its entire magnificence, as Paul of Aleppo once saw it, there is insufficient information in order to reconstruct the ensemble of dwellings and courts surrounding the 17th century house at least to a certain extent. The only construction of that time that still stands today is the church, built by lady Elina and her brothers Cazan and Udriște Năsturel, that only upon a close scrutiny reveals the characteristic

features of the religious architecture during Matei Basarab's rule beneath its Neoclassical decorations added at the time of Miloș Obrenovici: an open porch with brick archways, specific patterned brick friezes, etc.

Both the current back courtyards and the surrounding walls were built in the 19th century.

Considering historical information, as well as the analysis of the type of dwelling of the stone house, which on the one hand appears to be having the features of a summer house, with no stove chimneys nor an isolated staircase, and on the other hand completely lacking security facilities, we reach the conclusion that an older house had existed here before, which was permanently inhabited by its owners, and that a system of courtyards and houses must have been put in place for the many servants that a nobleman like Udriște Năsturel could have easily afforded. (...)

Features

The house has two quite uncommon characteristic features which make it a unique monument in the old Romanian civil architecture.

The first feature is the plane distribution of the chambers. In its initial form, the construction was „L“-shaped, its margins oriented towards north and west, and contained two living quarters almost identical in terms of its interior planning. Having communicating links between the ground floor and the first floor, the two quarters yet appear as distinct structures, each with its own separate entrance hall with portal, staircase and cellars.

This type of double lodging, designed for two owners, is a common sight in traditional archi-

ture. However, the Herăști house is the only type of such lodging ever built in the civil architecture.

The second feature is the construction system. The house is made entirely of thick walls adorned on either sides, both the front wall and the inner wall, with large dimension stone blocks. The space within the stone layering is filled with some sort of concrete made of broken stone and limestone, cast as high as the stone layering functioning as casing. The arches, the framed empty spaces and the cornice are all made of massive dimension stone with extremely shipshape finishing touches.

Noblemen's houses and palaces dating from the 17th and 18th centuries are often made of stone, yet only in their separate components: pillars, portals, balustrades, carved decorations, etc. The brickwork is always executed with bricks or rubble stone, dimension stone being used only for decorations. The house in Herăști is the only construction entirely covered with such a precious material, and that lends artistic value to its interiors and façades.

The house plan

„L“-shaped, the house design has three levels: the cellars, the ground floor and the first floor, the latter having collapsed to a large extent.

The cellars

Aligned along the long sides of the building, each of the cellars has its entrance through a vaulted passage, ending up at the façade with an open double archway. Between this entrance passage and the cellar there is a narrow, vaulted chamber, functioning as an antechamber, bordered towards the exterior by a thin wall, initially made of stone and subsequently replaced by a brick wall standing on the current wooden door case. A wooden plank whose traces are perfectly preserved separated the upper part of the room, making up a sort of secret vault, linked to the ground floor by a small door with a stone-carved

ledge. The cellar with the west entrance has only one room, covered by a cylindrical vault between two double-arches. It is lighted through two narrow holes, opening to the south and framed to the interior by flaring conical arches going deep into the cylindrical vault. The north-facing cellar includes, apart from the passage and the entrance hall, a large chamber with a cylindrical vault, supported by a double arch and lighted by two windows of the same type as in the western wing cel-



lar, and another two small rooms, cylindrically vaulted, extending to the eastern end. (...)

The cellars represent one of the most exciting attractions of the monument. Their large and well-balanced size is highlighted both by the look and the flawless finishing of the dimension stone.

The ground floor

The ground floor covers two thirds of the area covered by the cellar vaults, whose construction point lies at ground level. The rest of the area is covered by a number of small rooms with cylindrical arches, laid out on the entrance sides of the corner on the house plan. On each of the two sides there is an antechamber that is connected to the exterior by a classically fashioned doorway and there are two staircases from

those rooms leading to the first floor. (...)

The ground floor rooms are rather small, but their interiors stand out through their general coating with dimension stone and through the sober configuration of their doors. The staircase bottom also has a wonderful touch, starting up with an archway extending in the arched wall with a tilted beam. The chambers have been fully preserved, except for the entrance hall in the west wing, whose vault has partially collapsed.

The first floor

The first floor, accessed from the ground floor by two stone staircases that start from the antechamber, facing the entrance doors, covered

seven rooms. Three of them were fairly large and two must have been covered with wooden girders, the traces of which are still visible in the existing walls. (...)

The first floor windows are quite large (1.20 x 2.20) and they have tapering arches with tilted beams, built with the same system of monolithic stone arch pieces as for the ground floor windows. Outside, the windows have roughly shaped frames, arched to the upper side and smoothed back. (...)

Restoration works began in October 1954

The brick structures were pulled down, and the two-metre layer of dirt covering the ground floor and the cellar arches was cleared away. On



this occasion, the location of the doors of the first floor rooms could accurately be established and a series of subsequent changes of the first floor plan could be noted. So, room number 6 had been divided by a brick wall adjoined to the former brickwork whose stone layer had survived intact in the section joining the new wall. Rebuilding it was therefore given up.

Apparently, the direction of the entrance staircase in the western wing had been changed. After just a few steps, the staircase initially ended with a landing, then the stairs turned abruptly in a right angle, formed its own staircase and ended on the first floor before room number 6, where the doorframe was still visible. Subsequently, the steps were removed and placed as an extension to the first staircase, in order to form a linear set of stairs similar to the one in the northern wing. The staircase room that had fully preserved its stone layering was walled up with bricks.

Having noticed that the staircase landing was made of a sole stone plate on top of which the shifted stairs had been placed, as well as the perfect glide of the stone layering all along the landing and the staircase, including the section occupied by the steps, the restoration design provided for the return to the original structure.

Due to the tardy beginning of the reinforcement works, only a wide-ranging under brickwork was done, and several arches were propped. When the works came to a halt in December 1954, a temporary coating was applied, which is enough to protect the monument for a limited period of time. The extraordinary beauty of the cellars, the quality of the material used, as well as the harmonious and balanced artistry of the preserved architectural elements, all this related to a most remarkable historical past entail a special care for preserving and restoring this unique monument in our old architecture.

Notes

¹ Extrait traduit de OPERA OMNIA, ed Igloo Media, București, 2006

